

# **“When We Share Grace With Christ”**

November 23, 2008

Dr. Kipp Wolfe

Psalm 100

Matthew 25:31-46

Thanksgiving Sunday, maybe even more than Easter Sunday or Christmas Sunday, might be my favorite Sunday of the year. There is something that is just right about us as Christians, of all people, coming to give thanks to God. This past week as I was struggling with three or four different sermon titles that I had chosen, I went over to talk to Charlotte and Mary. Dwight was over there. One title that I had chosen was “Grumpy Grouches Need Graceful Gratitude.” Dwight voted for that title, by the way, so I want to include that for him.

I know no one here would ever be grumpy or grouchy. One reason that you are here this morning is that you’re grateful. We forget that from time to time, I suppose. All of us in these uncertain economic times, when we wonder how much lower the stock market might go – we sometimes forget to be grateful. As we face the uncertainty of a new administration in Washington, we might forget to be grateful. Just the uncertainty of life can cause us to be grateful. It can happen to any of us.

Someone told me a couple of weeks ago that during the sermon, about half-way through, some words were flashed up on the screen. I don’t know if you remember or if you saw them. The anthem that the choir was going to sing that day was called “Sleepers Awake,” and those words were flashed on the screen during the sermon. Isn’t that kind of harsh?

You might not have noticed that in lieu of the invitation hymn today, the choir is singing the anthem at that point. Did you see the title of the anthem? “Now Thank We All Our God.” It’s not hard for me to imagine that some of the choir members are thinking, “Now thank we all our God, the sermon’s finally over! The way he carries on, sounds just like my dog rover!” You might listen for that when the choir sings this morning.

Then this scripture - does this seem like a Thanksgiving scripture? The psalm that Howard read seems like a Thanksgiving scrip-

ture, but this scripture about the last judgment, is that really what we want for a Thanksgiving scripture? For some people it's exactly what they want. This is the way it's supposed to be. The good guys get their reward; the bad guys get it stuck to them. But I believe any serious person of faith might read this scripture and say, "Where's the grace? Where's the grace in this story?" This really is about what we do. If we do good we'll be rewarded, and if we do bad we'll be punished, not only punished but punished eternally.

Where's the grace? Where's the grace? The only grace some people will ever see is the grace we share with them. On many days the only grace that most of us will see is the grace we share.

This can be about the little things of life or the most important things. An example of the little things, Suzanne and I were eating in one of Tulsa's finest restaurants recently. You know it - Rib Crib. The waitress who waited on us, I can't remember her name but I'll call her "Salty," because her language was pretty salty. She was speaking to the people in the booth next to ours, and even where we were seated we could hear some of that salty language. Now you need to understand this. I spent a great deal of my life in a locker room, and she said nothing that I had neither heard nor said before myself, but one thing she said kind of caused Suzanne to laugh. She walked over and patted Suzanne on the back, and Suzanne said, "That's fine, we're fine, no problem."

Then Salty started telling us part of her life story, how at one time she had worked for Denny's. She said, "That was back before I got fat. I used to eat everything that Denny's had." Then I said something simple to her. I said, "You're not fat." I've paid a lot of compliments in my life. "You're not fat" was probably not my finest hour, but you would have thought I said to her, "You look like Miss America," and I have proof of this. I like to ask for a to-go cup for my Dr. Pepper. If you've ever eaten at Rib Crib, this is the "giant" cup they usually give you for a to-go cup. I asked Salty for a to-go cup and this is the cup that she gave me. This is the fat-free cup, but you might also call this the Grace cup. It's amazing what even a little bit of grace will do. That's a little area of life.

I know that you know of some people who are facing some big problems in life. Last Wednesday evening after choir practice I was driving home on Highway 75 South. I started to see the traffic backed

up, and then I saw the red lights. You probably saw in the news or read in the newspaper about the family that was in the car that was hit by the drunk driver. Those children had lost their mother about a year ago. Their grandmother had taken custody of the children, and she was killed in that car wreck. Now they have lost their mother and their grandmother in less than a year. Those children will need some grace in their lives. Certainly, the woman who was driving drunk needs some grace in her life.

I came across these words recently that I appreciate a great deal. David Buttrick said,

Be thankful for life and you'll never misuse it. Be grateful for the good world, and you'll never twist it out of shape. Think of it: thanksgiving as an ethical principle! Oh, if you insist on taking life by the throat and trying to shake out what's coming to you then, yes, food and drink and flesh will turn to dust. You'll stare at woodland with cash register eyes, calculating board feet, dollars and cents. Or you'll glance at copper stone and start counting the bullets you can make. But if life is a gift, gift on gift for joy, then you'll enjoy and share. Each day you'll get up and unwrap life like a surprise package sent to you by the love of God.

I like those words, but I like some other words, maybe even better. Simpler than Buttrick's words, an anonymous author wrote these words.

I sought my soul, but my soul I could not see.  
I sought my God, but my God eluded me.  
I sought my brother, and found all three.

Many of us identify the stranger, the one who needs our help, as a homeless person, someone who is hungry or thirsty physically, someone who is locked up in a jail, but there are persons all around us, often in our own homes, who are in prison, hungry, thirsty, and maybe even feel like strangers.

It was Schweitzer who said, "Christ comes to us as one unknown," but it is not Christ who is the stranger in our midst. Often it is those who are closest to us who can feel farthest away. If you're sitting by

your spouse this morning I hope you'll hear these words. How long has it been since you have said a prayer of thanksgiving for your spouse? I know, I know, there are times when your spouse drives you nuts. And I know also there are times when you drive your spouse nuts, but how long has it been since you have said a prayer of thanksgiving for your spouse?

If you don't think that's important, just take a look around at some who are sitting by themselves, whose spouses are gone. If you're in that situation and you miss your spouse, I would say this: thank God that you miss them. I know some persons whose spouses have died and it's been the happiest day of their lives! I'll tell you this morning you have God's permission to be thankful that that mean person is finally gone.

How long has it been since you have said a prayer of thanksgiving for your children? Whether they still live at home or whether they are grown adults, there is something God says to us about gratitude that is the key to living as God intends us to live.

Earlier I talked about those uncertainties of life, so we come today to worship the one thing in life that is certain, and that is God's love for us. More than this, God has called us to recognize the stranger among us, even if that stranger lives under our own roof. We are called to reach out to share with them, for in so doing we share grace with the living Christ, for our family members can become "the least of these" among us.

We can thank God that we have been called to a way of life that not only challenges us but also enables us to reach out to share grace with the very One who has shared grace with us at the cross.

Will you bow your heads and hear these words:

Help us, O Lord, this day to see you in the least and the lost, and may our righteousness not be in words alone but by what we do in your name. Bless us who gather to receive strength in fulfilling your promise of creating a world where no one needs to be hungry or thirsty, a stranger or naked, sick or imprisoned, but where all are entitled to our help in loving care through Jesus' name. Amen.